**Friday, March 8, 2024 / Bringing back the SAT**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

JONQUILYN HILL (guest host, *Today, Explained*): Do you remember taking the SATs?

SCORING IN <Bouncing Along>

LIAM KNOX (reporter, Inside Higher Ed): I remember it. I can't say I remember it fondly. I remember walking into the testing site with my perfectly sharpened number two pencils, my calculator, a lot of butterflies in my stomach.

JQ: That’s…very relatable. But in the early days of the Covid-19 lockdown, colleges and universities dropped requirements for the test.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVG4hqdqFkU)*> CBS Colorado: Because of the coronavirus, schools and colleges across the U.S. have closed their campuses and now the standardized tests like the ACT and SAT exams are being canceled in an effort to prevent the spread.*

JQ: But now SOME schools are bringing the tests back. They’re saying that SAT scores help them select a more diverse incoming class.

Other schools are saying that, actually, looking at SAT scores is BAD for diversity!

Why the standards are changing for this standardized test... and what that means for college-bound students… ahead on *Today, Explained*.

**[THEME]**

JQ: It’s *Today, Explained*. I’m Jonquilyn Hill filling in as host today.

Students across the U.S. are taking the SATs tomorrow [Saturday, March 9]... but not like how we remember them.

LIAM: Students have been walking in with those number two pencils up until this week, actually.

JQ: Liam Knox covers admissions and enrollment at Inside Higher Ed.

LIAM: The College Board rolled out its new exclusively digital SAT on Monday, nationwide. And now no more pencil sharpeners, erasers, pencils. It's all done on the Blue Book app. It'll be done on tablets and laptops. It's a brave new world.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5LNUsO7wfU)*> CBS News: The revamped exam will also be shorter, shrinking from three hours to just over two, and will average out to more time per question. These changes are possible because the new version of the test is adaptive. This means questions will get harder or easier based on how a student does as the test moves along.*

LIAM: So it's a really pivotal time, a time of great change for testing in more ways than one.

JQ: Yeah. I want to talk more about that change. Bring us back a few years. When did colleges drop requirements for standardized test scores?

LIAM: Colleges started dropping those requirements in the spring of 2020, so about almost exactly four years ago.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfZ1TsHuKG8)*> FOX Carolina News: The next session of SAT exams is canceled due to coronavirus. The College Board announcing today it's canceling SAT testing on May 2nd and students will get a refund.*

LIAM: When colleges started to realize it wasn't going to be feasible for students to get to testing sites in person, they essentially recognized pretty much universally that it wouldn't be fair to require the tests in the application process. I don't think colleges at the time had any sense that it would be more than just one application cycle.

JQ: Mm.

LIAM: But the important thing to keep in mind is that for these colleges, pretty much across the board, that initial decision to go test optional was not an ideological one. It wasn't a policy decision. It was an emergency protocol. And so now we're starting to see colleges make their actual policy decisions, bring out research and start to plan for their testing policies long term.

JQ: Where do things stand now? Across the country, you know, what are most schools doing right now when it comes to SATs?

LIAM: Most schools are still test optional.

SCORING IN <Uptown Duck Strut>

LIAM: Obviously, the recent big news is that Yale and Dartmouth have reverted back to test requirements.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaClawan5xA)*> NBC News: Yale University tonight is the latest school reversing course, now requiring standardized test scores for college admissions after hundreds of schools shifted to test option in recent years… Dartmouth issuing a similar decision earlier this month, after a study revealed standardized test scores were a better predictor of academic success than a high school GPA.*

LIAM: Other colleges, MIT and Georgetown, were the first to go back to test requirements in 2022. So some colleges have a mixed policy. Yale's is actually what's called test flexible. Which means that they'll accept AP and IB scores in lieu of SAT and ACT if students want. It's similar to the University of Michigan's pandemic policy, which they just abandoned. So there's no real sign which way colleges are going to go in general, but the vast majority are still test optional. Forty something percent of colleges were test optional before the pandemic. It's just a question of how many will actually go back to test requirements after four years of this being the norm. It's kind of hard to put the genie back in the bottle.

SCORING OUT

JQ: Are there common denominators between the schools that are choosing to be test optional and, you know, also between the schools that are choosing to bring their SATs back?

LIAM: The common denominator to a lot of the schools that were test optional before the pandemic and are very likely to stay test optional now is that they're much more open access. They may not, you know, have very low acceptance rates. But they are the schools that serve the vast majority of college-going students in the country. They're much more affordable. They're often public institutions. The ones where it's a really open question are the more highly selective institutions. They represent a much smaller portion of colleges in the country. They also serve a much smaller portion of college-going students, but they are also very well known names, and they tend to be flag-bearers for these kinds of policies. And so they have an outsized impact in that way.

JQ: Why are some of these schools bringing back test requirements? If so many schools are remaining test optional, how are they explaining that decision?

LIAM: It's varied. And, MIT and Georgetown had similar reasons in 2022 for going back to test requirements. Theirs were mainly about academic standards, about ensuring student success at their institutions and beyond.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2022/04/13/mit-standardized-tests)*> Stu Schmill, MIT's dean of admissions and student financial services: There are many students who attend schools where they do not have access to that advanced coursework. And for them, the SAT or the ACT are the best way for them to demonstrate their readiness to succeed in our curriculum.*

LIAM: For Yale and Dartmouth, which made their decision this spring, they had another very significant consideration to make, which was last summer's Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56T4XKFYgNE)*> NBC News’ Antonia Hylton: You know, there are a lot of kind of backdoor conversations happening right now about what kinds of tools, whether it’s income or doing away with standardized testing, what are we going to use to still make our campuses diverse.*

LIAM: That really brought up testing and, you know, reducing the weight of standardized testing in admissions as a potential race-neutral way, so legal way, to increase or maintain diversity in the admissions process. Research has long shown that there's at the very least a socioeconomic bias to test scores that wealthier students do much better on the test on average. There's more debate over the racial correlation, but there's a lot of data that shows that it also skews toward white students. And so that's been a big subject of the discussion around testing as colleges reevaluate what they're doing going forward in light of the Supreme Court decision. So Yale and Dartmouth actually led with diversity and equity as their reasoning for returning to test requirements, which might seem strange to anyone who's been paying attention to the discussions and research around testing for the past decade or so. But they did their own kind of in-house research, looked at their own applicant pools over the past four years with the test optional policy, and, according to their research, having everyone's test scores or having some standardized measure on every application was a way to level the playing field and a way to see promising students from backgrounds and from districts that they maybe don't see a lot of. What's interesting is that the University of Michigan and a number of other colleges that have decided to go test-optional long term came to the exact opposite conclusion in their own research. Michigan's research said that test optional helped them recruit and admit a diverse class of students. It diversified their applicant pool, so more students applied there who maybe didn't or couldn't for some reason take the SAT or the ACT. And in their admissions process, they were able to diversify their incoming class more successfully with a test optional and test flexible policy than they were previously with requirements.

JQ: Okay, so that's a little confusing. Because how is it that you have two sets of schools taking opposite approaches to the SATs, and both are doing it for the same reasons there? They have different research with different results. Like what's what's happening here? What actually does help underserved students?

LIAM: It is enough to make the average reader or listener's head spin. But the short answer is that these institutions are conducting research specific to themselves and their applicant pools. They're using different metrics, and…

JQ: Mm.

LIAM: …a lot of critics of standardized testing believe that essentially these are foregone conclusions supported with research to justify a decision that was made regardless.

JQ: You know, I also remember being a high school junior with butterflies in my stomach getting ready to take those SATs. I took them twice. I took the subject test, too. I was fretting over GPAs and essays and all these things about my future. It's a lot to navigate. And I wonder, what does this range of testing policies mean for students and families who are navigating the application process? Right now, it seems like so much is, is in flux.

LIAM: It absolutely is. And what it means is a lot more confusion to a process that is already very confusing, especially for students who come from families that, you know, maybe haven't had a lot of experience navigating the college-going process. It's not a world where there is one expectation across the board for what a student is going to want to include in their admissions packet, in their application. For some students in some states, taking the SAT is a graduation requirement. For students in California, if you are planning on even, you know, applying to the University of California system or the California State University system, two of the largest college systems in the country, you don't have to take the test at all. In fact, it won't benefit you if you do, because those two systems went test blind in 2020. They don't even consider it if you add it into your application.

JQ: So I guess the 1600 score question is, you know, how important is the SAT these days?

LIAM: That is a question that I think won't be answered for another few years.

SCORING IN <New Tension 01 - Time’s Arrow>

LIAM: It definitely depends on what kinds of schools you're applying to. For students applying to the very selective institutions, a lot of them have made it pretty clear, even if they are going test optional, that they value the test score, that it gives them another data point that's useful to them in making admissions decisions. But in terms of how ubiquitous tests like the ACT and SAT are, which have been ubiquitous pre-pandemic, a lot of colleges are waiting to make those decisions. That's in large part because the data that they have is from the past four years, and it's kind of tainted with the association of the pandemic, with the grade inflation that was rampant in a lot of ways in high schools during the pandemic, with learning loss, with the struggles of adapting your admissions process to a crisis like that. So it's a question that's very much still up in the air, and I think it's going to be up in the air for the next few years at least.

SCORING BUMP

JQ: That’s Liam Knox at Inside Higher Ed.

Coming up… are we a little TOO focused on the Ivy League?

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

*<*[*BUMPER*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijkKt2kxN84)*> Full House: “Pencils down, everyone. Time's up!” “Time’s up?! I haven’t even started!”*

JQ: It’s *Today, Explained*. I’m Jonquilyn Hill sitting in the host chair today.

Dominique Baker is an associate professor of education and public policy at the University of Delaware.

But she actually got her start working in admissions at her alma mater, the University of Virginia.

DOMINIQUE BAKER (associate professor of education and public policy at the University of Delaware): The SAT score was just one of many different pieces of information that I was using to try to better understand the education context of students. So that included thinking about the courses that they've taken based on what's offered at their school, their grades, test scores, yes, but also their essays or extracurriculars. There's a whole host of pieces of information that had to be filtered in. And the test score was not, on its own, more important than those other pieces of information.

JQ: Have the SATs become more or less important as a deciding factor through the years? How has their impact on, you know, admissions changed?

DOMINIQUE: It really depends. There are some institutions that will really weight heavily students’ test scores. And there are other institutions that like, oh, sure, that's one piece of the pie. But like, this doesn't tell the entire academic story of a student.

JQ: So, nothing happens in a vacuum. And last summer, the Supreme Court struck down race-conscious admissions. How is that factoring into colleges current decisions on whether or not to bring the SAT requirement back?

DOMINIQUE: I think a lot of institutions are trying to create an environment where both students can feel that they might be welcome at that institution, and so they're more willing to apply, and trying to give themselves as many tools in their arsenal as possible to be able to assess what an incoming class would look like that fulfills their missions and goals. And I think that's what we're seeing a number of institutions do, is say, are there ways that we can potentially make some of our requirements more flexible in light of the Supreme Court's decision in order to give us the best opportunity possible to create a strong incoming class, with strong being whatever is defined by their mission.

JQ: So there's this handful of elite schools that say they're bringing back the SATs, and they're doing it in part to ensure a diverse campus. But in light of the Supreme Court ruling, what else can schools do to ensure diversity in their incoming classes?

DOMINIQUE: I mean, it depends on the university. There's some universities that operate within states that have top X percent plans. Right? So they say sort of if it was the top 8%, then these students who are ranked in the top 8% of their high school have automatic admittance to a certain institution or a certain set of institutions in the state. There are institutions that have decided to go test free or test optional, as we've talked about. There are institutions that have decided that they will add an essay question that explicitly asks about students’ experiences with their race, their income, etc., etc. and to talk through sort of what has led them to this point, the ways that they might want to engage with the institution, etc., etc.. So there are a lot of these types of steps. But part of the really big challenge is the best decision for one institution may not be the best decision for another institution.

JQ: Colleges say they want a diverse campus and that is a good thing. But I guess the question that, you know, we don't really talk about a lot is why. You know there are all these different types of institutions. There are state schools, there are HBCUs, there are small liberal arts colleges, there are elite institutions, public institutions. But they all talk about diversity. What is the ultimate goal of that diversity on campus?

DOMINIQUE: For some, I think the goal is looking at the sort of decades of research we have that when you have a diverse class, along many different lines but including diversity along racial/ethnic groups, you see that people are able to learn better. They are more creative after taking classes that are racially diverse, diverse along income lines. There's actually really strong social science evidence that is just sort of all piled up that points to the fact that diversity enhances the learning mission of colleges and universities. But even beyond that, for some institutions, right, they see themselves as a part of upholding the sort of democratic fabric of our country. They are interested in contributing to the health and social advancement of our country. And for institutions that care about those types of things, diversity can matter a lot, because those types of institutions frequently see themselves as linchpins in ensuring that higher education can fulfill those goals. The thing is, though, the majority of institutions that are typically doing that type of work are often sort of community colleges and regional public institutions, which are not institutions that use holistic admissions, or are using test scores in the way that we are talking about when we think of Harvard and Yale and those places.

JQ: I'm glad you brought up, you know, the Harvards, the Yales, because when we're talking about the SAT coming back in particular, we're talking about schools that serve a small percentage of students. Right? I mean, your Dartmouths, your Yales, your Georgetowns, your MIT. That's not where most graduates are coming from, are they?

DOMINIQUE: That's completely accurate. You know, I'm currently doing a study where we are looking at the institutions in the United States that have an acceptance rate of 50% or less. And that's only around 185 institutions in the country.

JQ: Wow.

DOMINIQUE: Out of the like, thousands of institutions in our country. The majority of institutions that educate students in the United States accept the majority of people who apply to them, period.

JQ: Mm.

DOMINIQUE: Like that, that is the reality of the American higher education system. And so, in some ways, I think it can be valuable to talk about the types of, you know, sort of quote unquote elite institutions, because they have, sort of stranglehold on pathways to certain types of jobs and opportunities. But the ultimate reality is that if you care about social mobility in our country, and if you care about what the democratic aims are of higher education, then you care about community colleges and regional public universities.

JQ: Are we thinking too much about these elite schools instead of these other schools that, you know, the other 99% of students go to? Like I, I did not go to Harvard, but I kid you not, I feel like I have heard more and talked more about Harvard than I have talked about my own alma mater probably since homecoming.

DOMINIQUE: <laughs>

JQ: Like, who went here? Why are we, like, ain't nobody go here. Why are we still talking about this, you know?

DOMINIQUE: It's just, it's very silly. So, yeah, I think we focus a lot on the institutions where, quite frankly, a lot of the people who work in the media or the people who have jobs like me attended. And that creates a sort of lopsided environment where we don't always focus on the sectors of higher education that, in some ways, might be the most important. Like, I was just reading about the transition from the coal industry to renewable energy in West Virginia. And one of the biggest points that they mentioned was that some people who were trying to reskill were going to community colleges to learn about how to work with wind turbines. And to me, in a lot of ways, that is the goal and the mission and the power of higher education, way more than thinking about who got the chance to go to a fancy school.

JQ: How do you see the SATs kind of fitting into that vision when you look towards the future of college admissions?

DOMINIQUE: I think the challenge becomes that I often find that a lot of institutions are not necessarily honest with themselves or their sort of stakeholder groups about what their goals and missions are. I think part of that is from sort of like a social desirability space.

JQ: Mm.

DOMINIQUE: If you as an institution. Right, like it's hard for an institution like to go out and with their whole chest say, we like rich people.

JQ: Yeah.

DOMINIQUE: Love ‘em. Rich people are dope. They come here, they'll give us money for this little building, right, like it's hard to say that.

JQ: <laughs>

DOMINIQUE: Some institutions do it with their actions. But it's challenging for them to flat out say that. So I think that realistically, what we are frequently seeing is that the SAT, the ACT, that these test scores generally, the decision about whether or not to include them in a part of an admissions process, I think that it's presented in a way that what one institution does, all institutions must do.

SCORING IN <India Melody - Alternate Version>

DOMINIQUE: That sort of, there is a one capital T truth when it comes to college admissions. And so if Harvard says that they went test optional during the pandemic and now they've decided that they want tests again, that that means that that's right for every institution. And sort of, you know, the hope again, it's to come away from this is holistic admissions is about each institution making decisions for itself. And when I think about that vision of what a future society looks like, I really think that's a matter of institutions saying, what do we think our actual role is in the larger fabric of our society? And let's be honest about that. And then we make our decisions about our admissions process based on that. And that includes that institution's unique context, their applicant pool, what their goals are. So I think that really emphasizing institutions having a hard look at themselves and then suiting their admissions to that is the clearest pathway forward. We’ll see if that can actually occur.

SCORING BUMP

JQ: That’s Dominique Baker at the University of Delaware.

Today’s show was produced by Avishay Artsy, edited by Matt Collette, fact checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Rob Byers. I’m Jonquilyn Hill, and this is *Today, Explained*.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**